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***Saturday Night and the Evolution of its Rhetoric and Humor***

Ever since its creation, and even prior to, the goal of Saturday Night Live has always been to make its audience laugh. The comedic skit-centered show, created in 1975 by Lorne Michaels, has made household names out of many of its cast throughout the years, such as Chevy Chase, Gilda Radner, Eddie Murphy, and Chris Farley to name a few. The goal apparently has been continuously achieved, since SNL has ran for a total of 800 episodes since its debut, making it one of the longest-running network television programs in the United States. However, it has not been met without intensive amounts of controversy or backlash throughout the years of its existence regarding the topics of its skits, which has skirted around the issues of racism, homophobia, domestic violence, xenophobia, and more in popular culture.

Saturday Night Live (SNL) has been a popular staple in television ever since its debut in 1975. Continuously running on the same network since then, the show has become wildly popular among audiences and critics alike and has jumpstarted the careers of many of its various ensemble cast(s). SNL has always featured an edgy and borderline raunchy sense of humor in its skits, which has made it an easy target and example for criticism surrounding social issues in American popular culture. Because of this, SNL is an excellent platform for research and discussion on the ever-changing rhetoric and norms in the U.S. due to its extensive history on-air, and for the fact that the show’s concept is based off of popular culture/the norms of the “times.”

However, SNL has not just become a center of controversy. The show has also introduced an effective and vital dialogue for the same issues as much as it has mocked them. Recently, the show was the first one on cable to discuss the lack of diversity for the 2016 Academy Awards, thus bringing the issue to the wide attention of the public and forcing the Academy president to release a statement regarding the controversy. Instances like this are not the first and only ones to happen because of the polarization SNL holds over other skit-shows of the same genre. Regardless of which card SNL decides to play surrounding issues, the show’s evolution of its rhetoric and humor is vital to the discussion and awareness of the various social issues that the U.S. has faced and will face in the coming years. And SNL will always be there to comment on them through the usage of comedy, no matter what they are.

**SECTION ONE: LITERATURE REVIEW**

There has already been a great deal of research on this topic, due to topic’s longevity as a production and its weekly contributions to discussion as stated above. Maggie Rulli, now an established anchor/reporter for Channel One News in Boston, wrote her senior honors thesis on SNL’s usage of humor, titled, “Live From New York It’s Saturday Night Live: The Evolution of Humor as a Rhetorical Statement in the 35 years of Saturday Night Live.” Rulli compares the humor of season one of SNL to the most recent 35th season of SNL, explaining thoroughly how humor and pervasiveness in general impacts a culture as a whole and how SNL utilizes several theories of humor as outlined in the book “Communication Criticisms: Approaches and Genres” by Rybacki and Rybacki. In the chapter aptly titled “The Rhetoric of Humor”, Rybacki and Rybacki define humor as a “time-bound communication genre. It evaluates, critiques, and interprets contemporary events” (Rybacki 313).

According to this, there are three primary theories of humor. There’s the superiority theory, which stems from ancient Greek beliefs and states that “laughter expresses a person’s feeling of superiority over others” (Rybacki 321), whereas Freud’s relief theory contends that people laugh as a way of “releasing the energy that builds up from forbidden thoughts and feelings” (Rybacki 323). The final theory, the incongruity theory, claims that people utilize humor to try to “understand things that do not appear to make sense” (Rybacki 323). All of these theories are especially used in SNL’s political humor, as asserted in the essay, “Live from DC: Saturday Night Live Political Parody References in Presidential Rhetoric” by Josh Compton. While discussing examples of SNL’s political humor (Chevy Chase’s highly physical impersonation of President Gerald Ford in a 1976 skit, Dana Carvey’s emphasis on President George Bush’s use of words in a 1991 skit) and the presidential reactions following, Compton notes how all the presidential reactions were light in themselves, but discussed their impersonators in a subliminal but menial way, such as when President Ford said this regarding Chase’s impersonation of him:

*“And he struck on a responsive chord a few months ago when there were some comments concerning my alleged clumsiness, and* ***he has made a pretty good profession out of it”*** (Compton 3).

This direct response from the subject of SNL’s humor, a former President of the United States, serves as a double-serving example to the idea of humor theory, as Chevy Chase’s impersonation contended with Freud’s relief theory, and President Ford’s response aligned directly with the superiority theory. Not only does SNL serve to mock authority figures, but it also somewhat unintentionally motivates their audience to form opinions on politicians and politics in general, as outlined in the thesis titled, “Beyond Rocking the Vote: An Analysis of Rhetoric Designed to Motivate Young Voters” by Angela Brewer. According to this source, because the audience of late-night humor shows such as *Saturday Night Live* are typically on the younger end of the political spectrum, there’s a special “frequency with which young people use these programs as a source of information about current events and politics” (Brewer 25).

In a specific instance, SNL played a specific role in the coverage of the infamous 2000 presidential election. Brewer notes researchers’ Chris Smith and Ben Voth’s findings in their academic journal article, “The Role of Humor in Political Argument: How "Strategery" and "Lockboxes" Changed a Political Campaigns” as a primary source in her dissertation. Smith and Voth argued that since the use of humor was different in the 2000 election cycle than past presidential elections, political humor in the 2000 election helped shape “political reality because many Americans chose forums such as *Saturday Night Live* as their primary source of political information” (Smith and Voth 32). Because of this, Smith and Voth argue that the candidates’ response to the humorous portrayals of them on SNL affected the voter turnout, as Al Gore had a negative response to them while George W. Bush had a positive one. This example of a politician, like Al Gore, changing his “behavior based on the jokes told about him on television demonstrates the new role political humor has taken on in the political process,” while persuading “not only voters, but the politicians themselves” (Smith and Voth 33).

The superiority theory of humor also is a major part of comedy involving minorities, such as women, people of color, LGBTQ, and other specialized groups. SNL is often found guilty of utilizing this controversial take on comedy, as noted in Ian Hatchett’s article, “SNL Spoofs Common’s Race Rhetoric” for the Breitbart News Network. In the skit Hatchett discusses, titled “Hollywood Game Night”, the singer Common, portrayed by Jay Pharaoh as one of the contestants uses his introduction to say, “I play tonight on behalf of every black man who has ever struggled. Look how far we’ve come brothers, here I am, on top of the mountain” (Hatchett 2015). Later, when he incorrectly labels a movie poster that is clearly the poster for *Titanic* as the poster for *Selma*, Common reacts to being told his answer is wrong with, “unrecognized once again. Why not Selma? That is the question we have been asking ourselves. For we must be brave this day, glory.” (Hatchett 2015) While the skit follows Common and singer John Legend’s acceptance speech for Best Original Song for “Glory” from “Selma” at the 2015 Academy Awards that protested “numerous racist problems” in society, the skit proves that the superiority theory of humor is upheld on SNL.

However, SNL doesn’t just use its platform as a way to “poke fun” at minorities. The show also has produced many skits where it is one of the first media-wise to point out problems in D.C. and beyond. In her article, “SNL Calls Out Anti-Trans Rhetoric Surrounding Houston Equal Rights Ordinance Vote” for the Human Rights Campaign, Maureen McCarty points out that while the Houston Equal Rights Ordinance (HERO, introduced in November 2015) aimed to protect 15 classes, from LGBTQ people to women to veterans from discrimination, a number of anti-LGBTQ organizations launched a “fear-mongering campaign that painted a categorically incorrect picture of women in men’s bathrooms” (McCarty 2015). Following this, during SNL’s Live Weekend Update, actor Pete Davidson called out the anti-LGBTQ by saying this:

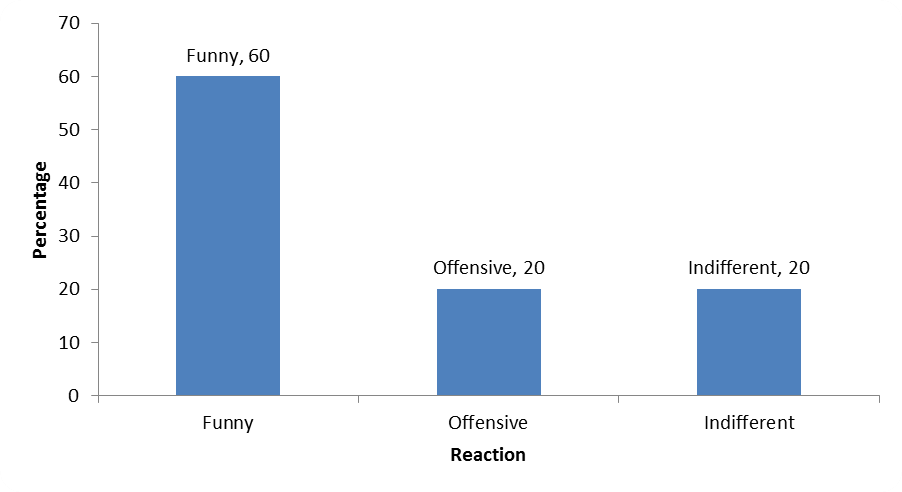
*“So the theory is that guys, in their relentless quest to watch women go to the bathroom, are going through years of hormones, surgery, changing their names, their wardrobe, coming out to their families,* ***all for that big payoff of peeing in a room without urinals.*** *What is this fantasy that they think is going on in there?”* (*McCarty 2015).*

This instance still falls under the superiority theory of humor umbrella, as well as the two others, but in this case, it is used to challenge the anti-LGBTQ organizations beliefs and thus, aiding in the forming of opinions of SNL’s audience and bringing awareness to the issue in Houston at a nationwide level. The way that SNL can play both sides of issues and use humor for each one, is what makes SNL such a polarizing front on both politics and social issues. It also forms a molding for what is acceptable to joke about, and SNL has been subject to criticism about this as much as it’s been praised.

**SECTION TWO: PRIMARY RESEARCH METHODS AND FINDINGS**

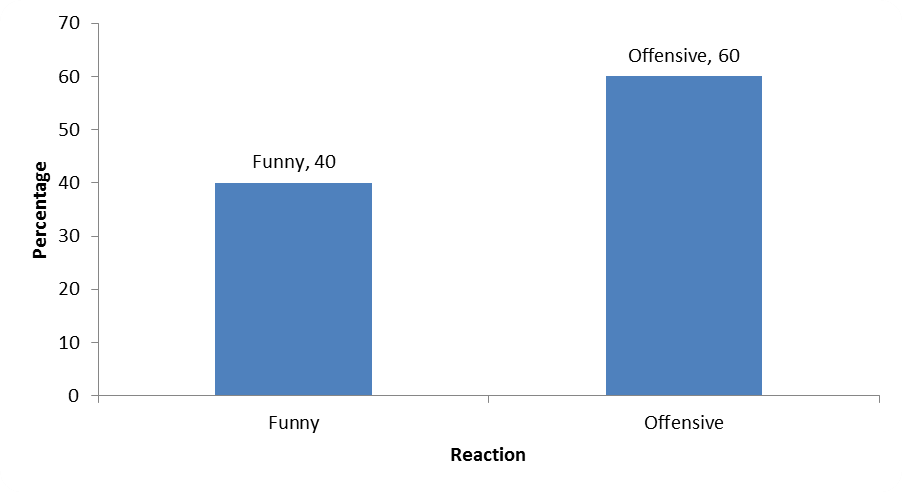
In hopes of elaborating upon what is deemed acceptable to joke about in today’s society, I created a survey using the platform Survey Gizmo. There were 9 questions on the survey in total, and 46 CMU students between the ages of 18-25 answered the survey in full. Surveyees were asked to watch three skits in full, each dealing with separate social issues, and answer the questions following each. I wanted to find what made people “tick” under the guise of humor, and determine how thick/thin of a line there is to cross with humor. Since SNL is historically known as being an often controversial comedy show, it was the perfect platform to use to find out just that.

In the next few pages, my findings will be discussed in elaborate detail using data displays, statistics, and summative paragraphs explaining each result of every question. Starting on the next page is the first of three data displays/commentaries.

***Skit #1: “Word Association” (1976) starring Chevy Chase and Richard Pryor ***

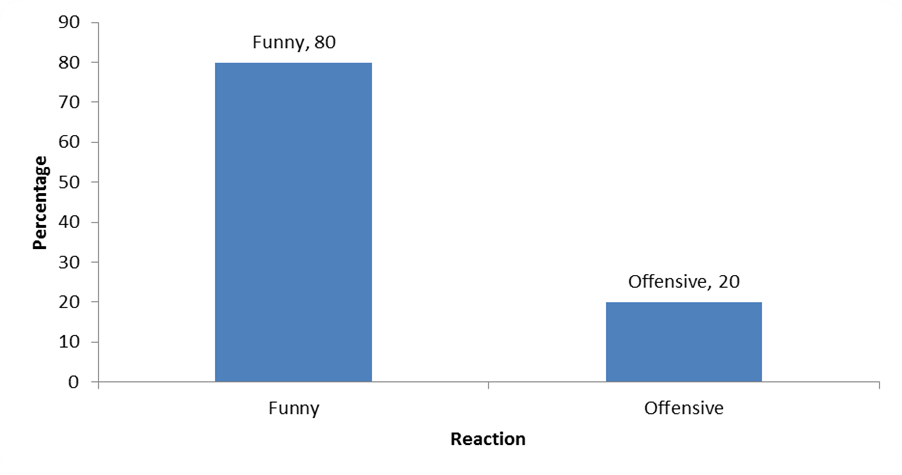
The graph above depicts each percentage of the reactions 46 college students of the age range of 18-25 selected in an online survey conducted from March 16, 2016 to March 21, 2016. This question on the survey asked the survey takers to watch a video of a 1976 SNL skit titled “Word Association”, with Richard Pryor and Chevy Chase. This skit dealt with the issue of racism in a work environment, as a hiring manager (Chevy Chase) gives a word association test to a job applicant (Richard Pryor). As the words become more racially charged, the two get angrier and angrier. After viewing the skit, surveyees were asked to choose one of the three following choices that most accurately fit their feelings towards the skit. As can be seen, an overwhelming majority of students found the skit to be funny (60%), while the rest felt it was offensive (20%), or indifferent (20%). This is rather surprising, due to the widespread claims across America that institutionalized racism still exists (police brutality, Academy Awards 2016 controversy, etc.…) and the backlash surrounding it, yet roughly 28 of the 46 surveyees found a skit that blatantly describes this epidemic to be funny rather than offensive. Combined, 80% (37 surveyees) found the skit to be funny or were indifferent, which leaves roughly 9 surveyees to find it offensive. This suggests that racism, when dealt in a humorous way and/or with a person of color being an active participant in it, is regarded as being acceptable.

***Skit #2: “The Situation Room: Tiger Woods’ Accidents” (2009) starring Jason Sudeikis, Kenan Thompson, and Blake Lively***



The graph above depicts each percentage of the reactions 46 college students of the age range of 18-25 selected in an online survey conducted from March 16, 2016 to March 21, 2016. This next question on the survey asked surveyees to watch a video of the 2009 SNL skit titled “The Situation Room: Tiger Woods’ Accidents”, with Jason Sudeikis, Blake Lively, and Kenan Thompson. In this skit, Wolf Blitzer (Jason Sudeikis) presents a series of stories about accidents suffered by Tiger Woods (Kenan Thompson). It becomes clear that the accidents are actually attacks made by his irate wife, Elin Nordegren (Blake Lively). After watching the video, surveyees were instructed to choose one of the following three words that best fit their feelings towards the skit; funny, offensive, or indifference. As the graph shows, there was no data for indifference since 0 out of 46 surveyees selected that answer, so the remaining sample thought the skit was either funny (40% or roughly 18 people), or offensive (60% or roughly 28 people). In the question following, which asked surveyees why they found the skit to be offensive rather than funny, 40% (or roughly 11 out of the 28 people who found the skit offensive) said that the skit was making light of the issue of domestic violence which is “never humorous.” An additional 40% found that the hypocrisy of the skit was its downfall, citing that if the sides were flipped and the skit was about Tiger Woods beating up his wife, “no one would find it funny.” While the percentages weren’t as far apart as the data for “Word Association,” the fact that more people found the skit to be offensive rather than funny is significant. This suggests that the issue of domestic violence is more prone to public backlash than the skit before, which dealt with institutionalized racism/discrimination.

***Skit #3: “Jesus Visits Tim Tebow and the Denver Broncos” (2011) starring Jason Sudeikis and Taran Killam***



The final data display above depicts each percentage of the reactions 46 college students of the age range of 18-25 selected in an online survey conducted from March 16, 2016 to March 21, 2016. The final question on the survey asked surveyees to watch a video of the 2011 SNL skit titled “Jesus Visits Tim Tebow and the Denver Broncos”, starring Jason Sudeikis and Taran Killam. In this skit, Jesus (Jason Sudeikis) helps the Denver Broncos them win six games in a row and visits Tim Tebow (Taran Killam) to tell him that he's tired of bailing him out every fourth quarter and that Bill Belichick, the longtime head coach of the New England Patriots, may be the devil. After watching the video, surveyees were instructed to choose one of the following three words that best fit their feelings towards the skit; funny, offensive, or indifference. As the graph shows, there was no data for indifference since 0 out of 46 surveyees selected that answer, so the remaining sample thought the skit was either funny (80% or roughly 37 people), or offensive (20% or roughly 9 people). Of the 37 people who found the skit to be funny, 40% (or roughly 15 people) selected that the skit was “obviously meant to exaggerate Tebow’s faith for the purpose of the premise, not demean it” as their reason. Of the 9 surveyees who found the skit to be offensive, they chose that the “skit made use and light of biblical beliefs very loosely and therefore, was offensive to those who are religious”, or that “by depicting Jesus as being immoral and mocking Tebow, [the skit] was demeaning while understating Jesus’ existence and the Christian belief of him being the son of god, who is by Christian belief is entirely righteous and holy.” Again, the fact that more people found this skit to be funny rather than offensive is significant, due to the uproarious amount of media backlash that followed the release of the skit and the usage of a prominent figure such as Jesus that plays a role in so many people’s faith.

**SECTION THREE: DISCUSSION**

Despite the still-ongoing controversy surrounding the show, SNL has become significantly tamer in its comedic approaches opposed to its start in 1975. This may be because SNL, which was once the sole comedy-sketch program, now has viable competitors, especially in the political humor realm. Shows like “The Daily Show,” “Last Week Tonight,” and the recently shuttered “Colbert Report” are giving SNL a run for its money, according to Nicole Hemmer of USA Today in her blog, “The Power of Laughter: 'Saturday Night Live' has the ability to shape the way we think about candidates.” According to Hemmer, the now 40-year old comedy sketch show “is showing its age. In an era rich with edgy comedy, watching the tame offerings of "Saturday Night Live" often feels more like an obligation than a pleasure” (Hemmer 2015).

The newfound “tameness” of SNL could be due to the special, mutually beneficial relationship the show has with the American public: SNL influences the audience, and in turn the audience influences SNL’s future skits. Take for instance the Tiger Woods’ accidents skit with Jason Sudeikis, Blake Lively, and Kenan Thompson. Ever since the uproarious backlash that immediately followed the skit’s debut in 2009, SNL has not since debuted a skit dealing with the issue of domestic violence due to the skit’s negative response. However, since the “Word Association” sketch in 1976 with Chevy Chase and Richard Pryor has met a mostly positive response, both in its debut and years after, SNL has continuously made skits centered around racism and race in general (such as the 2015 ‘Hollywood Game Night’ skit) because its audience has not seemed to have an overwhelming issue with the topic being discussed in a humorous fashion.

This may be true for all network shows, but the fact that SNL has had the power to shape opinions of its audience politically and socially wise is significant. According to Hemmer in the case of politics, “they [SNL] do have the potential to shape the way we think about candidates, while giving candidates a way to improve their score on that mushy metric, likability” (Hemmer 2015). In return, their audience is somewhat of a catalyst for what is socially acceptable to joke about. SNL’s “tameness” is due to in part to the ever-changing societal norms. While it may have been “okay” to produce the Tiger Woods skit in 1975, the simple fact that 80% of college students found that skit to be offensive in 2016 speaks volumes. SNL notices the reaction, and makes efforts to either alter or amplify their approaches depending on what reaction they gage from the public.

Their approaches mainly include shifting their language, rhetoric, and delivery of the skit. Not only are the skits words on a page, but they are being acted out as well. In all of comedy, this is what determines is a joke lands or falls flat on its face. If a stand-up comedian tells a joke one night on tour that doesn’t receive the praise they desire, they will either cut the line out of their stand-up or alter it in some fashion. Despite being an ensemble effort, SNL is no different. The show will always face criticism in some shape or fashion, but part of their purpose is create the controversy as well as minimizing it. The more “shock value” their show has, the more their show will be discussed. The key, however, is to balance the amount of controversy and keep it at an acceptable, redeeming level. If the show continued to joke about domestic violence, racism, or religion consistently, the upheaval of scathing criticism that most certainly would follow would be almost impossible to recover from.

However, one of the aspects that saves SNL from acquiring too much debilitating criticism is the fact that the show does not continuously target one group of people, whether it be a racial group, a special interest group, or a political group. It doesn’t follow the same thought vein as FOX News or NBC News, where one is historically known as being a Republican show and the latter as a more Democrat-centered one. Anyone, no matter what group they belong to in society, is subject to be “made fun of” on SNL. Since the show has been going strong on the same network for 40+ years, this fact must be commonly known among its both loyal and occasional audience.

SNL will continue to be a fixture of controversy in our culture, and that’s just it: it will *continue.* The controversy, the backlash, the protests; this is what fuels the show to continue to create the skits. As long as people are sharing videos of the skits on the internet, for both positive and negative reasons, the show will always be thriving in its purpose for its creation. In a decade, the subject matter and rhetoric of their jokes will probably change due to the new societal norms in that time, but there will always be an audience to influence SNL’s production and in turn, SNL will be there to influence the audience’s opinions.

So, regardless if you’re not glued to the screen of your TV every Saturday night, you can always depend on the rhetorical aftermath and effects of Saturday Night Live to be discussed, faster than you can say, “Live from New York, it’s Saturday Night!”

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